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# **Students' Constructions of a Christian Future: Faith, Class and Aspiration in University Contexts**

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## **Abstract**

Economic uncertainties have unsettled the status of higher education as an assured means to social mobility, raising questions of how students orient themselves to life after graduation. In this context, how does religion (a neglected aspect of student identity) shape students' attitudes and plans? This article examines the future aspirations of Christian students, theorising Christian identity as an inter-subjective resource through which 'alternative' futures are imagined, a resource variously framed by classed assumptions about propriety. It analyses data from 75 interviews with undergraduates at five English universities, and explores emerging aspirational paradigms structured around hetero-normative domesticity, the formation of Christian counter-narratives to contemporary capitalism and positive submission to God.

**Keywords:** Christianity, social class, aspiration, university students, higher education, careers.

## **Introduction**

This article explores how Christian students at English universities formulate their aspirations for the future. Students of faith present an interesting sub-group within universities because they might be expected to draw from a distinctive set of resources in constructing and legitimising their post-graduation ambitions. How does faith shape students' aspirations, and how is religious identity drawn upon in the negotiation of the pressures of a society framed by neo-liberal assumptions about power and success? Does a faith perspective afford particular resources with which to challenge these assumptions? We theorise Christian identity as an inter-subjective resource through which 'alternative' futures are imagined, a resource variously framed by classed assumptions about propriety and moral integrity. The following analysis explores the above questions with a particular interest in how the resources of faith and the resources of class interrelate. It also sheds light on how religious ideas and identities can be complicit in the broader reproduction of social class and its associated inequalities.

The article begins with a discussion of recent scholarship on the changing nature of the UK's universities and how this relates to broader values structured by social class. The emerging themes are then related to our specific focus on Christianity as an identity marker, before the questions and methods that define our main argument are outlined. The following section draws on interview data across five English universities, addressing Christian students' accounts of how they chose their particular university, including discussion of how class-based and religious factors frame these decisions. We then turn from students' aspirations for university to their aspirations for the future. We trace how Christian students' constructions of an aspirational future coalesce around three distinct foci: 1. the heteronormative nuclear family, 2. critical counter-narratives to western capitalism, and 3. submission to God and a sense of calling. Throughout the article, scholarship on social class and higher education is

drawn upon in relating students' aspirations to broader cultural patterns in the reproduction of power and privilege within western societies.

### **Constructions of Aspiration in the Neo-Liberal University**

According to Kim Allen, the language of 'aspiration' 'plays a pivotal role in institutionalizing neoliberal forms of governance which have reshaped class relations in contemporary Britain' (2014: 761). Addressing the formulation of aspirations among young women in further education, Allen highlights a hierarchy of values, identity markers and 'forms of self-making' that is also identifiable within the university sector. She observes how, in schools, certain kinds of art or literature are elevated as markers of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital', privileging the norms and mores of the middle class. This paralleled the New Labour government language of aspiration, celebrating the same educational institutions as meritocratic. She also points to 'moral distinctions' which 'structure the hierarchy of "aspirations"' (2014: 768), highlighting the identity work some individuals need to do in order to be recognised as 'the right kind of student' (2014: 768). Allen is not alone in pointing to the complex relationships between education, social class and the construction of identities among younger generations. Recent literature highlights how the university experience has been reconfigured in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with neo-liberal assumptions generating an understanding of student as consumer and university as service provider, each primarily governed by economic motivations (Amsler and Bolsman 2012; Collini 2012; Davies et al. 2006; Guest 2017; Sabri 2012; Slaughter and Rhodes 2000). This understanding is reinforced by a political discourse that affirms universities as 'engines of social mobility' (Johnson 2016), accorded value because of their presumed capacity to facilitate wealth creation and employability (cf. Browne 2010). Yet this image veils the capacity of higher education to perpetuate social inequalities and re-embed advantages enjoyed by existing social elites.

In an essay on the on- and off-campus experiences that shape students' future prospects, Victoria Mountford challenges 'the class neutrality of educational discourses and the logic of meritocracy underpinning the field' (2014: 62). Purportedly value-neutral measures of achievement, epitomised in quantifiable modes of student assessment and in league tables that increasingly dictate a university's status, disguise other, more informal behavioural markers that privilege certain groups over others. Part of this pattern has to do with experiences – e.g. the pre-university 'gap year' or regular involvement with student societies – more readily available to middle-class students than they are to working-class students with limited financial means, and who may need to do paid work alongside study, meaning extra-curricular time is limited as well. Mountford cites Heath (2007) and the idea of an 'economy of experience' (p. 64), highlighting the means by which different students gain advantage over others, and how hobbies and non-academic interests become matters in which their parents invest, building up a form of cultural capital that is often valued as much as academic currency in the post-graduation labour market (Mountford 2014: 66; cf. Reay, David and Ball 2005).

Mountford and others highlight how these circumstances generate a highly pressured environment in which the 'student experience' assumes new challenges as an arena for the negotiation of present and future ambitions. In a comparative analysis of working-class and middle-class students at the two universities in Bristol, Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) focus on how extra-curricular activities (ECAs) are increasingly salient in securing valuable graduate positions, and yet those best able to 'play the game' are those with existing

accumulated capital. Alluding to Lareau (2011), the authors write that this mode of working on the self may be ‘taken-for-granted practice amongst middle-class students’, built on “‘concerted cultivation” in the family, which involves the continual working on the child to create an individual with the right capitals to succeed in life...’ (2013: 726). However, such ‘work’ does not have guaranteed outcomes, and the co-presence of other identity-based or ideological agendas can complicate the quest to secure advantage, especially when value-based tensions need to be negotiated, as when religious notions of human fraternity exist alongside status competition or unequal privilege. As Addison and Mountford put it, an ‘imperative to prove worth demands imaginative strategies’ (2015: 4.3); the composition of these strategies among Christian students – discursive, value-laden, and contingent upon complex assumptions about power – forms the conceptual focus of this article.

More specifically, we explore how such ‘imaginative strategies’ are deployed in the formulation of future aspirations among Christian undergraduate students studying at UK universities. Gerrard (2014) argues that there is a pervasive ‘learning ethic’ within contemporary higher education that re-inscribes the logic of neo-liberal capitalism. She bases her argument in conceptual debates arising from Max Weber’s (1958) Protestant Ethic thesis (particularly his observations about the moral significance of labour as a duty), highlighting how forms of Christianity may contribute to the reproduction and legitimisation of the rational, worthwhile and successful subject. This enduring elective affinity appears more immediately relevant once we consider how the churches most popular with students in university towns tend to be evangelical or Pentecostal, emphasising the paramount authority of the Bible, being ‘born again’ as a conversion into faith, and the dissemination of the Gospel message through the conversion of non-Christians (evangelism).<sup>1</sup> Central to evangelical identity is what historian David Bebbington calls ‘activism’, or the expression of the Gospel in social effort (Bebbington 1989). The consequent preoccupation with changing the self and changing the world, together with the Calvinist elements of its theological heritage, makes evangelicalism particularly well suited as a site for the expression of the Protestant Ethic. Moreover, the vibrant subcultures and material culture of the evangelical movement (including its expression in popular festivals, literature and other merchandise) means its influence among Christian youth extends well beyond its membership.

These strands of Protestantism have also been distinguished in recent years by a celebration of individual empowerment that has fused the language of the Bible with the language of business (Cartledge and Davies 2014; Guest 2010; Marti 2010), highlighting affinities with the ‘aspirational’ language addressed above. At the same time, however, evangelical and Pentecostal churches have also shown a growing tendency to resist making a clear differentiation between evangelism as converting non-believers and evangelism as serving the needy. Consequently, there are elements of the evangelical movement that reflect the ideas of the corporate world while others affirm a self-conscious commitment to unqualified altruism and community service. Exploring the future aspirations of Christian students allows us to investigate the relative salience of these contrasting - if sometimes co-present - trends, both of which speak to questions of social class, social mobility and the purpose of education. Thinking in broader terms, we might ask: does Christianity have the power to inspire transgressive orientations to self-development, resisting the assumptions of neo-liberal capitalism, perhaps via the abdication of wealth-oriented goals or the valorisation of civic duty? Exploring the ways in which aspirations are negotiated by Christian students illuminates the relative salience of these moral imperatives within the neo-liberal university.

## Questions and Methods

This analysis is based on data from a three-year project about the ways in which the experience of university shapes orientations to religion and values among undergraduates who self-identify as Christian.<sup>2</sup> We analyse data from interviews with 75 Christian students at five universities in England, each with a distinctive institutional culture. These universities were selected to represent the diversity of the UK Higher Education sector in terms of historical development, geographical location, student demographics and institutional ethos. Importantly for this analysis, they offer a representative spread in terms of ascribed status (in popular imagination and more formal regimes such as influential league tables) and in patterns of student recruitment. For example, while Durham University was founded in 1832, occupies a place in the elite Russell Group of research universities, features high up in many league tables and recruits 40% of its undergraduates from independent schools, the University of Derby achieved university status in 1992, focuses resources more on teaching than research, recruits half its students from the local area, and the proportion of its undergraduate intake from private schools is 2%.<sup>3</sup> The correspondence between markers of status within and those outside of the HE sector are striking, if not simple. In addition to Durham (representing traditional elite universities) and Derby (representing the post-1992 sector), we interviewed students from the University of Leeds (a ‘red brick’ or civic university), the University of Kent (representing the ‘plate glass’ campus universities founded in the 1960s) and the University of Chester (representing the ‘Cathedrals Group’ of universities with origins in Anglican, Catholic or Methodist foundations).

The study included a national survey of randomly selected undergraduates within 13 universities across England. Those respondents who self-identified as ‘Christian’ were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed; a random selection of those who assented within our five case study universities formed our interview sample. The method of selecting Christian respondents by self-identification was employed in order to interrogate critically the ways in which the label ‘Christian’ is being self-ascribed, with what kinds of practical consequences for individuals, and to trace associated patterns in the expression of moral and religious values (see Guest et al 2013). This follows recent research highlighting the large penumbra of British citizens claiming some connection with Christianity beyond the comparatively very small proportion attending church on a regular basis (Guest, Olson and Wolffe, 2012). Identifying ‘Christian students’ by their church attendance or church membership would fail to capture this penumbra and would not facilitate an interrogation into how the category ‘Christian’ is deployed. Unsurprisingly, the survey results revealed a highly diverse population, including almost a third who never go to church and a wide range of understandings about what being a ‘Christian’ actually entails. Our sample of interviewees reflects this diversity, but is skewed (by a ratio of around 2:1) in favour of Christian students who are actively involved in the life of a church both during university term time *and* during vacation periods. The remaining third have varying relationships to organised Christianity, from those who attend church regularly when they are at home during Christmas, Easter and summer vacations but rarely or never attend during term-time, to those who maintain a consistent habit of occasional attendance wherever they might be, to those who rarely, if ever, attend a place of worship at all. Interviewees came from a variety of denominational backgrounds, with many having attended a range of different churches, including while at university. Church switching is commonly observed among younger generations of churchgoers, a trend emerging in tandem with a tendency to view churches as potential resources for the faith lives of individuals, rather than centres of enduring community (Guest et al 2013: 27-52). For many, denominational loyalty is less important than it was for their

parents and grandparents. This is especially true of attenders at Protestant churches. Students who had been raised Roman Catholic tended either to remain attenders at Catholic churches or stop attending church altogether once at university. A large majority of interviewees were white and aged between 18 and 21. Roughly two thirds were female and around 20% were international students. Interviewees were studying on a variety of degree programmes, including mathematics, computer science, physics and medicine, sociology, psychology, history and English. Students in the arts and humanities were over-represented, making up roughly half of those interviewed, but broader findings suggest this has more to do with the kinds of students available and willing to engage in interviews, rather than a tendency among Christian students to gravitate towards particular subjects.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees represented a fairly even spread in terms of their year of study.

### **Classed Aspirations and Choice of University**

Our interviewees' social class backgrounds reflected a broadly middle-class constituency: very few of their parents were in low paid or manual jobs, and over half were in higher managerial/professional or intermediate managerial/professional occupations. Over half had university degrees. Reflecting the correspondence between markers of status within and outside the university sector, according to our survey, students with the most highly educated parents and with highest status jobs were most likely to attend the highest status universities. This pattern appears to be replicated among Christian students; at the macro-level of key demographic variables, affirming Christian identity does not seem to make a significant difference to the relationship between social class background and university attended. But what kinds of perspective are articulated by the students themselves? Interviewees were asked why they had chosen to study at their particular university.<sup>5</sup> Among 75 interviewees, 43 explained their choice with reference to the academic status of their university or degree course, and/or its potential to enhance their social mobility or career prospects. One of the few interviewees from a working-class background, also identifying as Pentecostal, echoed this vision of higher education as a means to self-improvement. As they commented, 'It was kind of a spur of the moment thing to choose Derby but I just wanted to do a little bit better than my family did so I thought the best way to get a better job was to come to Uni, which is what everyone tells you!'

Second most popular (28 interviewees) were answers that highlighted their university's links to their family – including personal recommendations – or proximity to home. Sometimes the desire to be near home was grounded in economic reasons – for example, money saved by living with family rather than moving away – at other times because students wished to see their families on a regular basis. By contrast, some students said they had chosen to move away in order to put distance between themselves and their family. Slightly fewer (22) cited an emotional or affective response to the locality of their chosen university or its campus, emphasising notions of friendliness, enjoyment and sometimes scale.

A rationale rooted in status and upward mobility was the most common kind of motivation for attending a particular university, although a sizeable minority of students cited completely different reasons and some cited a combination of factors (including 11 who mentioned factors connected to religion, for example the religious student societies or nearby churches available). The logics of class difference were also in evidence in implicit judgements about the status of different universities. Among the 17 who mentioned their university was their 'second choice', it was common for Durham students to have been rejected by Oxford or

Cambridge, mirroring the status of the 'traditional' universities within the popular imagination, sometimes in spite of the more rationalistic evaluations published in league tables. Echoing the findings of Reay, David and Ball, we did not find strong evidence of the 'calculative, individualistic consumer rationalism' (2005: 58) that is mirrored in contemporary critiques of the sector. However, the majority representation of answers citing status and careers suggests an instrumentalist approach to university is highly significant among Christian students.

Many studies have found that working-class students at elite universities are preoccupied by the challenges of fitting in socially (e.g. Baxter and Britton, 2001; Kaufman and Feldman, 2004). A parallel experience can be found among churchgoing Christian students, many of whom emphasise social challenges associated with the sexual promiscuity and heavy alcohol consumption among their peers (Sharma and Guest 2013). There is a perceived dissonance between what is taken to be the dominant student culture and the mores internalised by religiously observant students. This dissonance triggers feelings of alienation and sometimes reinforces a tendency to coalesce into sub-groups of like-minded Christians, a pattern mirrored among some Muslim students (Valentine et al 2010). Although with less obvious social consequences, a related sense of dissonance can be discerned in Christian students' attempts to imagine their future selves. Campus life has its own moral trappings; life post-graduation requires that a different kind of territory be negotiated, one in which the moral and religious convictions of youth are more directly up against economic and family demands. Given the employment limitations of austerity Britain, we might expect the ideological principles fostered in campus life - whether religious, moral or political - to be especially vulnerable to disillusionment at the present time. Put more simply, the ideals of young adulthood are especially difficult to maintain during periods of economic constraint.

The following analysis focuses on interviewees' responses to our question: 'Does Christianity/being a Christian have any influence on your plans for the future?' In contrast to the question about choice of university, all respondents answered in the affirmative, suggesting their Christian identities are less pertinent to their educational choices than they are to the formation of aspirations in the longer term. Christian identities are brought into conversation with classed aspirations to varying degrees and in a variety of ways. Responses have been analysed and grouped into three categories, representing patterns of orientation to an imagined future, focused respectively on aspirations for a nuclear family, ambitions to express a moral critique of western capitalism through professional life, and a sense of 'calling', deferring future plans in favour of an open-ended trust in God. While we allowed responses to be coded by more than one category, there was only limited evidence of overlap, a clear majority of interviewees expressing a response that could be coded into one of the above. This categorisation cuts across variables of denominational background and Christian practice, suggesting all three are evident across a wide range of Christian students. They are also evident to comparable degrees in each of our five universities; some institutional divergences are apparent, but the differences are subtle, small and do not suggest our three categories are differentially fostered according to university type. Expressions of a moral critique appeared most frequently (in 57% of responses), familial aspirations were evident in 20% of responses, and 16% of responses reflected a submission to God's plan. The strong presence of Christian moral critique invites analysis of how Christian resources might be mobilised in ways that subvert dominant cultural norms.

### **The Familial Aspiration**

During the course of the last two centuries, Christianity in the UK has been associated more with the domestic sphere than the world of work, and (because of the gendered distinction between public and private spheres) more with women than men (Brown 2001). The numerical dominance of women in churches reflects this, notwithstanding the fact that as men and women's social roles are becoming more similar so the imbalance is becoming less obvious (Aune 2008; Woodhead 2008). The nuclear family remains an important plausibility structure (Berger 1967), especially in framing the moral priorities of conservative Christians, although these are sometimes accompanied by an intensification of gender images largely indebted to celebrity culture, a direction of development that troubles the presumed association between Christian identities and 'traditional' values (Maddox 2013). Whether framed by the expectations of their churches or wider culture, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of our interviewees, when asked about their plans for the future, emphasised their goal of getting married and having a family (with the raising of children in the Christian faith also often mentioned). This was frequently described either with no mention of careers or alongside a more dismissive comment about career choices, side-lined as relatively unimportant in comparison with having a family. Alternatively, careers were mentioned but alongside a strict demarcation of family life as the proper focus for nurturing Christian faith (in contrast to professional life, which was understood as functioning according to different rules). In this sense, Christian students collude with the secularisation narrative that locates religion increasingly within the domestic or private sphere, rather than integrated into professional life (cf. Casanova 1994). They also position themselves as divergent from the 'progressive' image of the 21<sup>st</sup> century university. While this image is contested and demands careful evaluation of the public discourses of higher education alongside the empirical realities of student life (Falconer and Taylor 2016), it nevertheless valorizes a model of gender and sexual inclusivity at odds with the heteronormative assumptions associated with traditional Christianity and upheld by these student interviewees.

Patterns of compartmentalisation emerged in an acknowledgement by students of the limited influence of Christianity in their lives, such as with Sophie<sup>6</sup>, a 20 year old humanities undergraduate at the University of Leeds, who commented: 'I wouldn't say Christianity overly shapes my future goals. I think they're pretty standard, kind of secular goals!' The use of 'overly' here suggests Christianity has its proper limits, that there could be such a thing as an excessive influence, perhaps reflecting the internalisation of common expectations that religion be appropriately restrained, modest and selectively applied. Selective application was in evidence among a number of interviewees, although rarely with Sophie's self-conscious restraint. Indeed, the connection between being a Christian and having a family was largely assumed, as if the latter were the most obvious and immediate expression of living out a Christian life. As Judy, a 21 year old creative arts student at the University of Derby, put it, 'I'll always have in my mind that I don't think I'll be settled until I get married and I would like to have children.' For several interviewees, reflection on this aspiration had encouraged further thought on how related life decisions might reflect their faith. Gloria, a mature pharmacy student at the University of Kent, was not atypical in her perspective:

'...because I have a Christian background, I do expect to get married. I do expect to get married in a church. If I was to have children – not decided on that one yet – but if I was they would be Christians and would be raised as Christian. I would let them make up their own minds as to whether they wanted to stay as that.'



Here the familial aspiration is extended into the upbringing of children; a consideration of marriage and family had led to thoughts about the passing of one's faith onto subsequent generations. Many echoed Gloria's approach in wanting their future children to choose for themselves once they are adults, but felt a firm childhood rooting in Christianity was important as a frame of reference for this choice. According to Martha, a 20 year old biomedical sciences student at the University of Chester, 'At least if you've gone through the process of being part of a religion and then decided for yourself this isn't for me, then hopefully you can understand why people will believe.' Hers was not the only response that seemed to anticipate the conditions of a secularised culture, as well as the tensions between the elevation of the sovereign individual subject and a desire for their future sons and daughters to maintain the faith that is so important to them. Presenting religious upbringing as a means of empowering and enriching a subsequent faith decision enables Christian students to resolve these tensions, claiming Christian faith as central to primary socialisation while at the same time upholding the axiomatic value of neo-liberalism, i.e. the primacy of the self-directed consumer.

Such considerations were not merely matters of future speculation; they also featured in the management of current relationships, with religious compatibility an important factor. Several interviewees were already engaged to be married or expected to be in the near future. This is a trend often found within evangelical churches, and reflects their commitment to an ethical position that restricts sex to within heterosexual marriage (Page et al 2012). Moreover, romantic relationships are commonly viewed as permanent from a relatively early stage, with a prolonged non-married state inviting questions about the proper intentions of those involved. In this sense, a conservative sexual ethic appears to foster a life-course pattern that runs counter to the cultural norm in the contemporary UK, in which decisions about marriage and family are often now deferred until the late twenties or thirties, especially among the middle classes. This pattern, characteristic of an extended 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2004) is less evident among churchgoing Christian students, many of whom appear to have integrated a heteronormative set of domestic plans into their aspirations whilst still at university. This pattern – while predominantly affirmed by female interviewees – was not restricted to them, with some male students also placing family, rather than professional life, at the heart of their hopes for the future.

It is difficult to establish the extent to which factors related to social class are complicit in these expressions of familial aspiration, given the deep and long-established integration of such familial norms into western Christianity. However, emerging patterns do hint at a complex combination of accommodation and resistance to cultural norms not unrelated to social class identities. The desire to start a family early, and in conformity with a heteronormative nuclear model, affirmed by these students as central to the long-term formation of their Christian selfhood, becomes especially striking the more it appears counter to the cultural norm among emerging adults. This in itself marks a pattern of resistance, although, as we will discuss below, it is one bound within classed norms that reinforce assumptions about the power of the individual subject.

### **Christian Counter-narratives and Moral Critique**

Those channelling their aspirations into a heteronormative model of the nuclear family echo the wider social tendency to place religion within private, rather than public, spheres. By contrast, the majority of our interviewees actively challenged this bifurcation. These students

integrated their Christian values into their career plans, imagining a future in which their faith might be applied, advanced and embodied within the context of their working life. For a few, this aspiration remained undeveloped, in some cases on account of their university degree programme leading them in a direction whose resonance with Christianity was difficult to discern. For example, Jack, a 20 year old at the University of Kent, reflected on his degree subject, Management Science, commenting: 'how am I going to glorify God...in doing this?', echoing a common struggle to reconcile the conventions of the corporate world with an inclination towards altruism and collectivism associated with Christian ethics (Gill 1999). Others imagined their eventual occupation as a potential context for evangelism. Leanne, a 20 year old languages student at Durham, imagined a working environment 'where I'm able to share the gospel with people...because I just think it's the best news and love people to hear it.' Here the precise nature of her work is secondary to the desire for a social context in which to share her faith, echoing an evangelical emphasis on conversionism (Bebbington 1989; Strhan 2015: 89). While this conception of work as a 'mission field' was in evidence, most interviewees offered a more closely integrated perspective, one that conceived of their *choice of career and mode of doing it* as mirroring their ethical convictions as Christians.

A striking illustration is found with Ruby, a 19 year old social studies undergraduate at Kent, who rejected suggestions from people at her church that she should enter Christian ministry, instead asserting her belief that 'God wants me to be out in the big wide world.' She goes on:

'...a Christian that can talk to other Christians about their faith is brilliant, but a Christian who can talk to non-Christians about their faith is amazing and God didn't make people that could talk about their faith to put them in churches, because people in churches know about their faith...I want to be a high flying career woman, I want to work in international relations, either at the UN or for Christian Aid...or something like that and I want to give a Christian influence there and I want to be up with the high flying career, money driven people, to let them know that there is more to this life than careers and money...'

Like Leanne, Ruby structures her aspirations around evangelism, but also weaves in a moral critique, seeking to challenge the lifestyle choices of those driven by 'careers and money'. Of course, by placing herself 'up with the high flying', she also imagines herself occupying the echelons of the professional elite, even while aspiring to be a prophetic voice among them. In this respect, she anticipates a career much like those successful evangelical professionals in the metropolitan US and UK, who integrate elements of their Christian identities into their working lives in the corporate private sector (Lindsay and Smith 2010; Strhan 2015). Ruby's perspective affirms an ambition to occupy the same space while also challenging the values upheld by her professional peers. Indeed, evident contrasts could heighten her Christian presence within the working environment; as Lindsay and Smith argue, 'efforts to bear witness to one's faith are most visible when set in relief against competing symbols and practices.' (Lindsay and Smith 2010: 740)

By contrast, other interviewees drew a much clearer distinction between different sectors of the professional world, formulating their plans in relation to other careers or industries they viewed as morally objectionable. The principal grounds for such judgements centred on assumptions that certain careers promote selfishness or materialism or simply do not contribute anything worthwhile to society. By contrast, their own choices focused on altruism and humanitarian concern, with careers cited including healthcare, teaching or working in the charitable sector. For some, moving into a caring profession is a natural extension of their faith. For example, Helen, a mature humanities student at the University of Chester, referred

to voluntary family-related work she already does: 'I'm doing it because I feel that that's part of my journey.' While this evokes notions of 'calling' influential within Christian tradition, it also points to underlying assumptions about what counts as a worthy career. Gordon, a 21 year old maths undergraduate at Durham, made sense of his own perspective in counter-reaction to his degree programme:

'I mean I've actually just come from a mathematical finance lecture which was very interesting, but a lot of the lecture was basically about how to maximise the amount of wealth that we're accruing. And I understand that from a business perspective, but that doesn't sit particularly comfortably with my faith; and I definitely think from an employment perspective I'd much rather have a job that I feel is valuable, and is where God wants me to be, and helping other people, than something fairly arbitrary in business or finance. I'm not saying that those are bad things; I'm just saying I feel that God's given me different gifts and is sort of calling me in a different direction.'

Gordon's understanding of 'value' here centres on care for those in need, and yet he resists any moral condemnation of more profit-driven occupations, preferring to relativise his position with reference to where God is calling him *as an individual*. While a moral critique is arguably implicit, he is keen to preserve *individual* integrity as a pre-eminent value: he rejects the corporate career option because he feels God has steered him on to a different path. Others were less equivocal in their criticisms of the corporate world, like Jessica, a 21 year old maths and computer science student at Durham, who recounted her recent experience at a careers fair, recalling that she was 'the only one going around asking about corporate social responsibility.' She viewed herself as unusual in factoring in ethical considerations when deciding on a future career, and prioritised ethical responsibility above the possibility of a high salary:

'As long as I've got enough to live on and have the odd treat, it's not really important how much I earn. It's things like wanting a clear conscience that affects my future choice more because I know I could live [in] poverty a lot more easily than I could live with a lot of guilt.'

As a student at an elite university browsing opportunities at a careers fair, Jessica's comments should be placed within the context of broader frameworks of class and privilege. Both of Jessica's parents have university degrees and they both work in intermediate managerial, administrative or professional occupations. As a Durham graduate, her stock of cultural capital will be significant and she may, in the not-so-distant future, find herself among the elite networks she alludes to above. Her claim that she would 'happily take a pay cut and work in McDonald's rather than work for a defence company' may indicate an intention to prioritise moral principle over financial expediency; it also reflects a classed position in which practical necessity is treated as negotiable in deference to moral choices that are personal and paramount.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Edward, a 20 year old language and literature student at Chester, who recounted a recent experience working at Disneyland, Paris, which had highlighted for him the 'horrible' consumerism typifying western societies, adding 'I don't plan to be rich!' Here, a 'cosmopolitan habitus' (Allen and Hollingworth 2012: 10) functions as a complex resource in the construction of a particular kind of middle-class identity: both contingent on international travel but also reflexively affording moral critique on the commercialism encountered as a consequence. Many of these interviewees expressed counter-narratives in two senses: first in presenting one's working and religious life not as discrete or compartmentalized but as fused together; and also in seeking to perform their

careers in a way that advances a set of moral values viewed as counter to what they see as the dominant values of western capitalism. Aspirational paradigms here function as a means of reinforcing subcultural identities. Christian students seek to differentiate themselves from what they perceive as the cultural norm in order to preserve a moral space, a space that depends for its coherence on appropriate 'outgroups' (cf. Smith 1998). However, markers of distinction emerge not in reference to contrasting social or religious groups but to expressions of moral degeneracy, principally focused on indulgence, acquisitiveness and self-servitude. Their career aspirations are legitimised via a self-conscious disavowal of other forms of career that, so it is claimed, advance these objectionable qualities.

For some, aspirations to establish an appropriately 'Christian' professional alternative meant working for explicitly Christian organisations such as churches, Christian charities or missionary organisations. These aspirations were often grounded in prior experiences gained during gap years or vacation periods, through temporary jobs, mission trips, volunteering or internships. Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) discuss such opportunities in terms of an 'economy of experience', and argue that they tend to be disproportionately available to middle-class students. The assumption among some interviewees that such opportunities would be easily accessible points to a relatively privileged background. Arguably, sub-cultures of 'Christian work experience' function as carriers of middle-class privilege, perpetuating the middle-class bias within UK congregations, especially those evangelical churches oriented towards youth and young adults (McKenzie 2016). They do this by channelling a disproportionate amount of resource - most obviously the cultural and social capital of middle class students with the necessary free time - into the reproduction of church cultures that maintain a middle-class character. Simply put, middle-class churches thrive in part because they attract, foster and affirm the cultural capital most accessible to their members. One might go further and suggest that, via a cross-fertilization of cultural capital, such church-sponsored training schemes thereby assist universities in reproducing the status of elite groups in society (cf. Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012).

Christian work experience also serves as a resource that shapes how possible futures are imagined by Christian students, just as heteronormative models of the family refracted through memories of their own upbringing did for the students discussed earlier. This reinforces the power of the university as a space in which - at least for Christian students - possibilities of religious influence, leadership and public practice are made available to an extent that is way beyond the norm in wider UK society. Given the secularised character of the UK and the predictable, mundane pressures of adult life, most of these Christian students will not have such abundant, accessible and regular opportunities to express their faith socially after they leave university. These opportunities largely emerge via vibrant, popular, student-oriented local churches and student-led on-campus societies, both of which offer a variety of formal and informal roles through which students may develop new skills - such as public speaking, facilitating group activities, organisation and leadership - and find a channel for the expression and recognition of existing talents. Loader et al (2014) argue that campus student societies remain important sites for the cultivation of values and development of emerging orientations among students. While Loader et al researched political societies, their findings are to a degree echoed in our own research into Christian societies like the evangelical Christian Unions. They argue that tendencies can be identified that reflect traditional or 'dutiful' approaches to politics (focused on voting and party membership) on the one hand, and more self-actualising approaches (more episodic, issue-specific and reflecting the shifting priorities of the individual) on the other. However, a common commitment to 'giving something back' to society through voluntary action suggests

arguments for a strong form of reflexive individualism might be exaggerated (Loader et al, 2014: 12-13). Similarly, among Christian respondents to our survey, it was Christian Union members who were most likely to have engaged in volunteer work over the previous 12 months. The social capital of an organised, student-led society appears to foster an active, practical expression of shared values. What it also does for Christian students is facilitate an assumption of roles and involvement in group activities that expands the boundaries of what can be imagined for the future.

### **Submission, Calling and Christian Selfhood**

Christian students who affirmed aspirational paradigms centred on family or virtuous careers shared an important common feature. These ambitions, while judged as commensurate with (or even constitutive of) a Christian identity, were also understood to be a product of individual Christians making their own choices. Aspirations for the future were conceived as self-directed, even though framed by specific models of what the good Christian life entails. To find the sovereign individual at the centre of these Christian students' imagined futures is not surprising. It reflects the voluntaristic individualism that is quintessential to Protestantism - emphasising faith as personal decision - but which has migrated to a wider, more inchoate tradition of popular religion characteristic of younger generations, which valorises happiness, self-fulfilment and the realisation of personal aspirations (Collins-Mayo et al 2010; Smith and Denton 2005). It also reflects the social class identities of our interviewees, who, while by no means homogenous, include a large number from middle-class, in some cases privileged, backgrounds. It is much easier to maintain faith in one's capability to achieve the goals forged in youth when the social structural constraints of disadvantage do not feature in one's own personal story.

A third pattern in the formation of aspirational paradigms appears to diverge from this assumption of personal empowerment by deferring future ambitions to the will of God. The perspective of Joe, a 21 year old humanities student from the University of Leeds, serves as a helpful illustration. He saw Christianity as having

‘...every influence on my plans for my future. Really my future is...God on high. So He will like let me know...I will pray and I firmly believe that God will call me to do something, to take the next step...’

Reflecting on possible future trajectories, Joe said if something is ‘not for the glory of God’, then he sees no point in doing it. Moreover, while he articulates a dependency on God's guidance, he insists this is not constrictive of his ambitions: ‘it's fully freeing and it's also the centre point...it's the reason why I will do what I do next.’

Such expressions of submission to God raise challenging questions about how discourses attributed to the divine should be appropriately dealt with in sociological research. Reductionist perspectives that exclude God from social scientific discourse risk confusing ontological and sociological claims; God remains an important sociological factor because a belief that divine powers infuse everyday life inevitably shapes the behaviour of those embracing this perspective. Anna Strhan grapples with the same issue in her study of evangelicals in London; she draws on Georg Simmel's work in exploring how they ‘experience God as “other” and the agency this has in forming their subjectivities’ (Strhan 2015: 51). God was invoked by our interviewees in a way that implied agency, although how

this agency functions within the process of formulating aspirations for the future is complex. On one level this amounts to a hopeful projection of coherence or meaning, as with Alice, a 20 year old English and Theology student at Durham, who expressed a hope that God might have some idea about what she could do in the future, as she didn't know herself. Appealing to the divine invokes a sense of stable purpose, even if the substance of that purpose is unclear at the present time. But references to God also have a more active expression, particularly in terms of discernment and prayerful decision making. Lisha, originally from Africa, was a 21 year old Psychology and Education student at Kent, and elaborated in some detail on her own prayer life.

‘...having Christ in my life...helps me make decisions. Every plan I make I have to put in His hands. For example, when I finish my exams, I pray and put everything in His hands and I do my best as God would like me to do, just to glorify Him and be with Him. And I'm pleased myself as well; I please God, that's the amazing thing. As I'm doing something for the glory of God, I'm getting something out of it as well, I'm learning from it.’

Here, submission to God is presented not as a passive abdication of control, but as introducing a complex discursive site that promises exchange as well as reassurance. Lisha engages with God as a relational conversation partner, and in so doing participates in a process of self-development that has practical consequences. This evokes Voiculescu's study of Pentecostal Gypsies, for whom internal dialogues with God contribute to a process of self-expression. Indeed, conversations with God are presented as ‘a form of self-reflexivity’ (Voiculescu 2012: 1.5), highlighting how engagement with God's guidance emerges as an active process of identity formation, especially among those influenced by Pentecostal or charismatic notions of an immanent and vital divine presence.

Some Christian students described this process using the language of ‘calling’, which has a long history in Christianity, associated with vocation, ‘chosenness’, and divinely ordained purpose expressed within individual lives. Max Weber (1958) famously connected ‘calling’ with the Christian asceticism that, according to his argument, played an instrumental role in the emergence of rational capitalism. In his study of evangelical international students studying in the US, Roman Williams explores the narratives that surround contemporary discourse about ‘calling’. He argues that, even though students may not know what God's plan is for them, their talk of being ‘called’ reflected their active pursuit of an answer to the question ‘What does God want me to do with my life?’ (Williams 2013: 264)

The instability that this orientation might imply evokes the psychological anxiety Weber attributed to Calvinism, whose doctrine of double predestination left the ultimate fate of its followers unknowable. While these Christian students' immediate concern is not the prospect of hell and damnation, merely economic uncertainty, the comparison is helpful for what it reveals about changing Christian orientations to the world. Weber highlighted the existential difficulties of living with uncertainty and argued that this-worldly success offers symbolic reassurance as a sign of one's favour with God. For these Christian students, uncertainty and open-endedness appear to be positively embraced, or at least confronted with a confidence that God's guidance will steer them toward a benign outcome. As Julia, a mature student in nutrition and dietetics at Chester commented, ‘I know God has long-term plans so I just trust Him for that.’

Deferring personal ambition to God also enables students to disavow the self-serving or amoral motivations they cite as symptomatic of a morally degenerate culture. As expressed

by Ruth, a 19 year old Chinese student studying humanities at Chester: ‘I don’t want to go in my own direction but actually go where God leads me...’ Refusing to own any career ambition, deferring instead to whatever God has in mind, may suggest naiveté and an abdication of practical responsibility about one’s future, but it also implies an expression of resistance towards embodying the kind of subject celebrated within neo-liberal models of success. One interviewee put this most starkly in commenting: ‘I think...as a Christian you can’t really feel autonomous over your life.’ While the abdication of neo-liberal subjectivity appears as an element in this third pattern, it is important to frame this in relation to the social class identities of these students. To disavow conventional careers and the aspirations they represent presumes a social confidence arguably the preserve of a privileged demographic. Such disavowal also points to a concern for self-actualisation, symptomatic of a late modern ‘new individualism’ (Elliot and Lemert 2006) that conceives of professional life as part of the larger project of forming the self. This pattern is not distinctive to Christian movements, but it does appear characteristic of the western middle classes. Writing about ‘spiritual entrepreneurs’ across several western societies in her book *From Yoga to Kabbalah*, Veronique Altglas notes how exotic religious resources ‘are appropriated as techniques enhancing middle-class emotional experience...’ (2014: 282), not least insofar as they appear governed by the ideal of self-realisation, and accompanying demands for flexibility and autonomy. While there is no evidence that these students are comparably eclectic in the construction of their Christian selves (see Guest forthcoming), they tend to imagine their futures in a way that preserves an analogous space for self-directedness, reflecting a consonance between their religious priorities and their class backgrounds (Bourdieu 1987). By apparently ‘opting out’ of the cultural imperative of aspiration, Christian students imagine themselves as bypassing the prevailing social order; but their expressions of autonomy reinscribe a highly classed set of assumptions about the kinds of people who get to choose their destinies, and those who do not.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion has sought to illuminate the processes whereby Christianity and class interrelate within the discursive expression of students’ aspirations. In so doing, it has considered what Bourdieu (1985) might call cultural and religious capital, and illuminates the complex ways in which the two feature in students’ attempts to make sense of their imagined future selves. While consonant with Bourdieu’s emphasis on power, our analysis departs from Bourdieu’s tendency to conceptualise apparently dissonant social fields in terms of a disruption of identities. Rather, the tensions between class-based and Christian identities, both in dialogue with the pressures of the neo-liberal university and an uncertain future, appear to be comfortably correlated within strategies of identity construction evident among Christian students. It is clear that ‘imaginative strategies’ (Addison and Mountford 2015: 4.3) are being deployed to negotiate emerging tensions, but they appear to be successful insofar as students articulate aspirations that are largely coherent and optimistic, rather than uncertain or conflicted.

Scholars have observed how compartmentalization is a strategy for coping with the dissonance between university life and social class background (e.g. Reay et al 2009: 1111); some Christian students use a similar strategy for handling a perceived tension between Christian values and the values of the professional world. As discussed above, this follows three patterns: one channels aspirations into the nuclear family, effectively side-lining paid work as marginal to the project of cultivating the Christian self; another mobilises notions of

‘calling’ that allow aspirations to be unarticulated while retaining a distinctively Christian sense of duty and purpose. This second pattern also conveys a sense that the social and material circumstances that ordinarily constrain people’s lives do not apply; effectively, God will circumvent the structural limitations of social class. It is easy to see how this notion could be reinforced within Christian circles, especially those that uphold the ‘anti-structuralist’ understanding that individual effort is more important than social structural conditions, often expressed by evangelicals who see the solution to moral decay to be personal salvation, rather than social reform (cf. Emmerson and Smith 2000). In this sense, the modern conceit that social class is a thing of the past (Addison and Mountford 2015) is reinforced by patterns of affirmation among Christian students that mask social factors and ‘naturalise’ (Mountford 2014: 68) life choices centred on family or the submissive self, obedient to the path God has set out for them, even if that path is not yet clear. Paradoxically, the latter appears to convey both privilege and powerlessness: privilege in that only those with the necessary social safety net can afford to ignore the risks of a precarious job market; powerlessness in fostering an inertia that is legitimated in theological terms.

The third, more integrative pattern, referred to above in terms of Christian counter-narratives to western capitalism, embodies different kinds of assumptions. Here, what Allen calls ‘moral distinctions’ (Allen 2014: 768) remain at the forefront, structuring emerging understandings of what a ‘worthy’ Christian life should look like. The future is imagined as a site of Christian resistance and opposition, with careers viewed as channels through which moral good can be advanced and the Christian message more widely disseminated. It is important to note the ‘imagined’ status of such aspirations and what this reveals in terms of class-based identities. We are reminded of Jessica, discussed earlier, taking a critical stance against corporate irresponsibility from the vantage point of a Durham University careers fare. This is a highly classed expression of moral conviction; not illegitimate at all, but still inescapably framed by circumstances in which risk is kept to a minimum. Within this pattern, aspiration emerges as an imagined site for positioning oneself as different from a perceived norm, i.e. a narrative of western capitalism that foregrounds moral failings to do with selfishness, superficiality and materialism. Put another way, these Christian students are driven by a desire for autonomy from what they take to be the principal cultural drift of western society. However, in seeking autonomy and presuming self-directedness, they embody most profoundly the western traditions of individualism they want so passionately to escape (Rose 1991). It will take further research into the professional careers of these students to ascertain whether their Christian identities have empowered them to subvert or reinforce these assumptions and the structures of social class that give them meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> For an authoritative discussion of the emergence of Evangelicalism, from which Pentecostalism developed in the early twentieth century, see Bebbington (1989). An excellent account of Pentecostalism as a global movement can be found in Martin (2002).

<sup>2</sup> ‘The project ‘Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England’ was funded by the AHRC and ESRC’s Religion and Society programme (Council ref AH/G014094/1). The principal investigator was Mathew Guest, co-investigators were Kristin Aune and Rob Warner, and the postdoctoral researcher was Sonya Sharma.

<sup>3</sup> These figures were correct during the academic year 2010-11, when data was collected for the ‘Christianity and the University Experience’ project. Evidence from subsequent years is not suggestive of any significant change.

<sup>4</sup> Analysis of our survey data from the same project suggests there are no clear correlations between choice of degree programme and whether or not respondents self-identified as Christian. Moreover, subject choice could



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not be established as a predictor of responses to most questions about belief, morality or religious practice (see Guest 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Students often gave more than one motivation, and were coded accordingly, hence the higher number of coded answers than interviewees.

<sup>6</sup> All interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms.

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